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AUTHOR McKinney, Kay; Paulu, Nancy
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ABSTRACT

This brief pamphlet considers ways that parents can benefit from visits to their children's schools and from discussions with education staff. Suggestions are listed for planning a school visit, observing the school atmosphere, becoming familiar with school policies and services, understanding school curricula, and discussing student progress. Suggestions are also provided for working parents. (CB)

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PARENTS:

HERE'S HOW TO MAKE SCHOOL VISITS WORK

Written by
Kay McKinney

Edited by
Nancy Paulu

U.S. Department of Education
William J. Bennett
Secretary

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
Chester E. Finn, Jr.
Assistant Secretary

Information Services
James J. Bencivenga
Director

Targeted Products
Nancy Paulu
Branch Chief

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PARENTS: HERE'S HOW TO MAKE SCHOOL VISITS WORK

Parents are their children's first and most influential teachers. Children who are happy, well-adjusted, and earn top grades almost always have parents who take an interest in their school work.

One of the best ways parents can become involved is to visit their children's school to talk with the principal and teachers.

Unfortunately, many parents don't do this. The Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools in Baltimore recently asked Maryland parents about their school involvement. (The U.S. Department of Education funds 14 research and development centers across the country. These centers conduct research on ways to improve American education.) More than one-third of those surveyed said they had not met with a teacher during the year. Almost 60 percent said they never talked with a teacher by phone.

Many parents feel uncomfortable meeting with teachers because they don't know what questions to ask. Schools can sometimes be intimidating places for parents. But they shouldn't be. Parents can do several things to make school visits easier and more productive.

Here are some suggestions developed by the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) for becoming familiar with your children's schools and their progress. Although these ideas are for elementary

school children, many of them can be adapted and used by parents of children in middle, junior high, or high schools.

Planning A Visit

First, plan your visit. Start by talking with your children to determine their attitudes and perceptions about school. Ask them what their favorite and least favorite subjects are and why; how they get along with teachers and other children; how they are doing in specific subjects; and, what their grades are. Their perceptions may be entirely different from reality. For example, they may believe they're getting a low grade when they're actually doing "A" work — or vice versa.

Have them tell you about their teachers, principal, and other students in their classes. Find out what they would like you to discuss with their teachers.

Think through in advance the questions you want to ask. Write them down so you won't forget them or use this brochure as a checklist.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Most teachers and principals welcome visits and inquiries from parents. Some schools don't mind if parents drop in for visits, while others prefer they call first. Check with your school to see what the policy is. Always sign in at the office when you arrive.

School Atmosphere

Visiting a school can acquaint you with its physical and learning environments and help you learn about the administrators, teachers, and students. If it's been awhile since you were last in a classroom and you're uncertain what to look for, here are a few suggestions:

- Observe the outside area around the school. Is it orderly?

- What is on display in the entrance or reception areas?
- How would you describe the halls and bathrooms?
- Is student work exhibited anywhere?
- How do the principals, teachers, and students interact with each other? Do they greet one another by name?
- How do students behave between classes? Are they orderly?
- What types of materials do students have on their desks during class?
- What kinds of interruptions occur? Are announcements made frequently over a loudspeaker? Are students pulled out of class often?
- How are individual classrooms decorated? Is academic work displayed? Is outstanding work visually recognized anywhere?
- How large are the classes?

School Policies and Services

You should be familiar with the school's policies. They often are explained in a handbook distributed when school begins. If you have a copy, read through it before your visit. If any of the policies are unclear, now is the time to learn about them. If you haven't seen a handbook, find out if the school has one. If you don't already know, you may want to ask:

- What is the attendance policy? How are absences and tardies treated?
- What are the dress and conduct codes?
- How does the school handle discipline problems? What are the punishments for breaking rules? Who carries out disciplinary actions?

- Ask your child, the teachers, and the principal if the school has a drug problem. If there is one, what is the school doing about it? What kind of drug education program exists?
- What are the school's policies for keeping parents informed about school schedules, events, or problems? Is there a newsletter?
- What facilities does the school have? Is there a library? What are its hours? How many books does the library have? What kind? What types of reference books are available for students?
- What types of special services does the school offer? Does it offer testing programs for vision, hearing, and learning disabilities? Is there a guidance counselor? Is a school nurse available? Is there any kind of supervised after-school study program for students?

Curriculum

You need to know what your child is expected to learn during the year. Here are some questions to ask:

- What are the teacher's academic goals for the year?
- What will your child be learning in math or reading during the year? For example, in math will it be decimals, fractions, or division?
- Ask to see samples of your child's work.
- What must your child learn to be promoted to the next grade?
- Are students placed in groups for reading and math? What group is your child in and why? Ask for specific reasons. How often does the teacher re-evaluate your child's placement in a group? If your

child is in a low-level reading group and his skills improve, will he be promoted to a higher-level group?

- What kinds of tests does the teacher give to see if students have learned the material taught in class? How often are they given? Are test results sent home or given to students?
- What kinds of achievement tests will be given during the year? What is their purpose? How will the results be used?
- How often is homework assigned? What role does the teacher expect you to play in homework?
- How is your child's grade determined?
- How often are report cards sent home?

Behavior

Here are some questions to ask about your child's progress:

- Is he doing as well as he should be in school?
- Is she performing at, above, or below grade level in her subjects?
- Is he completing homework assignments?
- Does she need any special help in any subject? If so, where is the help available?
- Does he get along with other children?
- Does she show any behavior, such as squinting or being tired, that may signify a physical problem?
- Are there any discipline problems with your child?
- Does he participate in class?
- How are her work habits and attitude?
- Can the teacher suggest ways you

can help your child do better in school?

- How does the teacher keep parents informed about their children's progress or problems?

This is also a good time for you to share information about your child. Have there been any recent upheavals, such as divorce or a death in the family, that may affect school performance? Discuss any special talents, interests, or strengths your child shows at home.

It's also a good time to give the teachers a pat on the back. Frequently the only time teachers hear from parents is when they have a complaint. Make it a point to compliment your child's teachers when things are going well. Mention specific instances where the teacher has been especially helpful to your child.

Suggestions for Working Parents

When both parents work, it is often difficult to find time for a school visit. Most teachers try to have at least one conference a year with parents of all their students. Such conferences seldom take longer than one hour.

Your boss may be willing to give you an hour off for a school conference. If it is impossible to get away from work during the day to meet with your child's teachers, arrange to talk with them by telephone. If you drive your child to school, leave a few minutes early one day to drop in at the office, introduce yourself to the principal, and take a look around.

Many parents attend evening or weekend school functions, such as band performances, plays, assemblies, or athletic events. Teachers often are on hand at these events. If you call ahead of time, teachers may agree to meet with you before or after the event. Some teachers also

may be willing to come in early to meet with you before school. Remember that many teachers are also working parents and appreciate the difficulties you face. If you're willing to make the effort to meet with them, most teachers will do likewise.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Being involved in your child's education at school doesn't take any special skills. It does take time, attention and common sense. How involved are you?

- Do you attend parent-teacher organization meetings?
- Do you read the notes and newsletters your child brings home from school?
- Do you talk with your child's teachers regularly?
- Do you keep up with his homework?
- When your child brings home schoolwork, do you look at it and discuss it with her?
- Do you read aloud to your child and encourage him to read?
- Do you set high standards for your child, encourage her to do well, and praise her when she does?
- Do you create a climate for learning in your home by setting aside quiet times for studying?

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The Department of Education has prepared several publications to help parents. They can be ordered by writing to the Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, Colorado 81009. Two of them are free; the others cost 50 cents each.

What Works is a practical guide for parents and teachers. It contains easy-to-read summaries of research found to be most effective in helping children to learn.

It is free. (When ordering, please include the item number, 504R.)

Schools Without Drugs is a guide for parents, schools, students and communities on how to fight drug use by children of all ages. It is free. (When ordering, please include the item number, 502R.)

A series of five leaflets contains information on how to help your children improve in specific skills. The leaflets are 50 cents each. Their titles and item numbers are:

"Help Your Child Do Better in School," #402R.

"Help Your Child Improve in Test-Taking," #403R.

"Help Your Child Learn Math," #404R.

"Help Your Child Learn to Write Well," #405R.

"Help Your Child Become a Good Reader," #401R.

"How to Help Your Children in School" is a 23-page booklet with tips on how to help your children pay attention, keep interested in schoolwork, study and take notes, and improve in test-taking. It costs $3.75. It is available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. (When ordering, please include the stock number, 065-000-00176-4.)

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To help you find answers to questions about education statistics, research, technology, and programs, the Department operates a toll-free number: (800)424-1616 (in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area call 626-9854.)

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